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Eduard Hanslick, 1825-1904

The perfect anti-Wagnerite

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"Herr Merker, was doch solch ein Eifer?"
(Wagner, *Die Meistersinger*)

Eduard Hanslick, who was born 150 years ago, has always been a controversial figure. Brahms loved him; Wagner hated him. More positively, he is remembered as the first famous formalist, and hence among the foremost formative influences on modern musical aesthetics. Music, said Hanslick, magisterially and memorably, is not the expression of feeling or ideas: it is just "sonorous forms in motion" (*tönend bewegte Formen*), and those forms are its only content.

But that view has never commanded wholehearted assent, not even, it seems, from Hanslick himself; and despite its apparent clarity and detachment it was basically confused and emotive in origin. That is not intended as a criticism; rather it is a definition of criticism, as of almost any human mental activity. Hanslick himself finally felt that "everything is subjective, in the life of the emotions"; by that time, Freud had reached a similar conclusion. If emotion sways intelligence, thought becomes doublethink; and Hanslick stands high among the great doublethinkers of the 19th century.

In his aesthetic credo, *Vom Musikalisch-Schönen* ("On the Beautiful in Music", 1854), he gives 12 bars of "Che farò" from *Orfeo*, and then quotes with relish a contemporary comment that the music might just as well express happiness as grief. But that assumes that music can be expressive; one might as sensibly refute the unluckiness of 13 by claiming that it can sometimes be lucky. Indeed, Hanslick went on to complain that music has far apter means of sorrowful expression (*Ausdruck*) than those used by Gluck. The very mainstay of his thesis is a cleft stick.

Hanslick's own practice turns out to be as self-contradictory as his preaching. First, it seems far from fitting that the great formalist and proponent of absolute instrumental music should have been electively a song-writer. Not only has the lied no form of its own; it has a built-in expressive programme. But Hanslick's lieder are a theme of his autobiography. Schumann recommended a batch of them to his publisher, who seems to have mislaid them. Some 35 years later, Brahms recommended a further batch to his, who printed them. But they have still remained in obscurity. Even the best of all critical writers on Hanslick, Friedrich Blume (in *Musik in Geschichte und Gegenwart*), notices them only very briefly, with the date "c1875". That may confirm that they have not been examined: the volume itself is twice plainly dated 1882 (corroborated by the plate numbers, Brahms's correspondence, and the BM copy's autograph inscription).

In 1882, Hanslick was 57; and he had been the doyen of formalism for nearly 30 years. He felt (and it remains a good talking-point) that critics should have some experience of composition, which seems reasonable enough. His own music is melodious and competent, and occasionally something more. Schumann and Brahms would not have recommended it lightly; and it easily keeps pace with the general run. Even so, the title *Lieder aus der Jugendzeit* (early songs) was plainly designed to disarm. Some of the skills look rather mature, even Brahmsian (there may well have been some friendly retouches). But there seems no reason to doubt that most of the songs were indeed written in Hanslick's twenties, about 1845-50. The salon verses selected are redolent of that period. The most helplessly derivative are by Hanslick's fellow student Robert Zimmermann. The main themes of *Vom Musikalisch-Schönen* were also in a sense derived from his texts. For he later became a professional philosopher; and there is surely no mistaking the immediate source of Hanslick's aesthetic, even though it failed to surface until Zimmermann's *Aesthetik* some years later.

But that is the sole link. The rest is a wrenching break between music and theory. The latter was well summarized by Susanne Langer: "emotive meanings in compositions are anathema". Yet Hanslick granted himself special dispensations by the dozen. His song music is made to blow down moaning like the night wind, or rise up trilling like the dawn lark.

Ex. 1



Ex.1 follows the words "in the night, the trees sigh so sadly"; ex.2 precedes the words "I walked abroad early, with the song of the lark". Hanslick must have known perfectly well what his left and right hands were both doing, in these as in many other examples - namely sketching out emotive and descriptive ideas, in typically Schubertian gestures (compare *Erlkönig* and the Mayrhofer *Sehnsucht* respectively). Furthermore, such gestures held the whip-band throughout Hanslick's lifetime; and their spirited spurt from the lied motif into the leitmotif is plain for all to see and hear. Yet Hanslick not only changed horses in mid-century but actually warned everyone else off the course. Before long he was taking his self-appointed stewardship so seriously that he disqualified the Ride of the Valkyries for overstepping the bounds of true music.

So irrational a ruling demands an explanation, especially as Hanslick had begun his career with a long and fulsome panegyric on *Tannhäuser*, which showed "the greatest dramatic talent among all living composers". Mysteriously, he reversed the verdict when it came to *Lohengrin*, which made no appeal. It seems a perplexing point at which to draw the line; and though Hanslick freely described his about turn, he never explained it.

What, then, had happened between *Tannhäuser* and *Lohengrin* to transform Hanslick into the perfect anti-Wagnerite, even at the expense of biting back his own words, adopting someone else's ideas, denying his own normal mode of musical expression and rendering his own songs unpublishable until 30 years later-and then excused as mere youthful indiscretions? How had Wagner offended so grievously?

Not musically; he lay fallow after *Tannhäuser*. Verbally, then? But there was no meeting or correspondence. Yet there was a communication from Wagner which Hanslick might well have taken personally. It was in 1850 that the notorious "Das Judentum in der Musik" ("Judaism in Music") first appeared, in the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*. It was written under the pseudonym K. Freigedank, but the real authorship was an open secret. It provoked an outcry, and it clamoured for a reply. Hanslick himself later confessed that his *Vom Musikalisch-Schönen* was essentially negative and polemical; it was manifestly a counter-attack directed *contra* Wagner (which accounts for its otherwise astounding popularity; it is controversy that sells, not aesthetics). Then there is the further damning evidence of Hanslick's disclaimers. That may seem a tendentious line of argument. But "qui s'excuse, s'accuse" is sound psychology; and in Freud's Vienna, any claim to be wholly devoid of personal animus sounds like an open invitation to probe for the sore point.

Hanslick further denied, 20 years later, that he had read "Judaism in Music" when it first appeared. It seems hard to credit that he could have missed so sensational an article in his own favourite journal, from which, by his own account, he had so recently learnt his trade. His third denial is neither credible nor creditable: he twice explicitly stated that he was not Jewish, and once added for good measure that his father was not either. He might just possibly have forgotten Wagner's virulently anti-Semitic essay; he could hardly have forgotten his own much-loved Jewish mother, who had died five years before its publication. Her personality, habits, nature, character, appearance, voice and speech must, according to Wagner, have been thoroughly repugnant to every right-thinking person. From that moment, it seems, Hanslick ceased to be a right-thinking person. It was not "emotive meanings" in music that became anathema; it was a case of renouncing, and denouncing, Wagner and all his works.

No doubt there are worse grounds for one's convictions than filial love and loyalty; and Hanslick's understandable reaction may be intellectually as well as emotionally sound. It rested on some further very firm foundations. His music had begun at home-a happy, cultured, sheltered home-and it always stayed there. Music was for him a way of life, a society, a religion, a whole world of human values. So of course it had its divisions and partitions, its class structures and national frontiers. One highly favoured enclave was the Viennese bourgeoisie. Hanslick greatly admired clarity of style; charm of manner, lightness of touch; many of his favourite works are the musical equivalent of gracious living, as if the criterion were not society but Society. Even his aesthetic is largely a matter of good form. At the same time his mind ranged wide and deep. He was uncommonly perceptive and original about thematic unity, the musical analogue of individual integrity and social cohesion. Conversely he was highly sensitive to any hint of instability in the musical mind (in Schumann's last period, for example), as in the social structure. Yet he philosophically accepted the corollary that values, like societies, must change with time; he clearly foresaw that the immediate future might lie with Mahler, Wolf and Strauss rather than with his own beloved Brahms.

There is a further consequence. One does not have to be, as Hanslick was, a jurist, a civil servant, a professor and a critic to agree that society needs laws, government, education and standards. But in so far as music mirrors such a need, its original geniuses will be outlaws, like Wagner. Conversely, in so far as music is truly autonomous, its conservative critics will be Beckmessers, like Hanslick. Critics are therefore as disposed to dispute the autonomy of music as artists are to affirm it. But that discord was sublimely resolved in *Die Meistersinger*. The artist as a free citizen accepts but transcends the constraints of his own time, class and nation. Thus prizes are available for those who are both truly creative and wholly German. Hanslick, ineligible on both counts, might be forgiven for not finding this the ideal solution. But it fits the equation perfectly, in his own terms; his status as a critic is not that of Beckmesser but of Hans Sachs, creative and German in the widest and wisest sense.

There is clear evidence of his devotion and service to the culture and tradition of his fatherland (or father's land). To demonstrate his creativity it is necessary to unite the contradictions of his thought, which then prove fertile. Briefly: if music is really forms, as he said; and if those forms are its only content, as he also said; and if it also contains feelings, as he further said: then the forms must themselves signify or represent feelings. That seems a seminal and viable aesthetic, with the interesting corollary that music may sensibly be considered either as structural or emotive, either analytically or descriptively, as one's aptitudes and temperament dictate, without extolling or denigrating either aspect. It was Hanslick's simultaneous adoption of two quite different viewpoints that gave his vision an added perspective and a new dimension, which are still entirely valid today.